

Message Text

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TAGS: PINT, PDEV, UK
SUBJECT: REGIONAL LABOR PARTY CONFERENCE, SCOTLAND

REF: LONDON 3109

SUMMARY. THE LABOR PARTY'S ANNUAL SCOTTISH CONFERENCE WAS A DISTINCTLY DOWNBEAT AFFAIR, THOUGH RELATIVELY FREE FROM RECRIMINATION OVER THE MORIBUND DEVOLUTION BILL. THE CONFERENCE ACCEPTED THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAD DONE ITS BEST ON DEVOLUTION, REAFFIRMED ITS DEMAND FOR AN ELECTED ASSEMBLY IN SCOTLAND, URGED A PROMPT REFERENDUM ON THE ISSUE AND VOWED TO CARRY THE FIGHT TO THE SCOTTISH NATIONALISTS, CONSERVATIVES AND LIBERALS IN THE MAY 1977 LOCAL ELECTIONS. CONFERENCE ALSO REJECTED A RESOLUTION CONDEMNING ANTI-DEVOLUTION LABOR MPS. ECONOMIC POLICY WAS THE OTHER MAJOR SUBJECT BEFORE CONFERENCE. WHILE MUCH OF THE DEBATE WAS CRITICAL OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES, UNEMPLOYMENT AND PUBLIC SPENDING CUTS, THE CONFERENCE APPROVED AN INDUSTRIAL POLICY DOCUMENT NOTABLE FOR ITS MODERATION AND EMPHASIS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR, WHILE REJECTING RESOLUTIONS HOSTILE TO GOVERNMENT

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POLICY. WITH LOCAL ELECTIONS ON THE HORIZON, LABOR PARTY LEADERS SUCCESSFULLY AVOIDED A DIVISIVE CONFERENCE, BUT WERE UNABLE TO PUMP MUCH SPIRIT OR ENTHUSIASM INTO THE PARTY STALWARTS. END SUMMARY.

1. COMING ON THE HEELS OF THE GOVERNMENT'S RECENT REVERSE ON THE DEVOLUTION CLOTURE MOTION (REFTEL), THE

LABOR PARTY'S MARCH 11 - 13 ANNUAL SCOTTISH REGIONAL CONFERENCE WAS WIDELY EXPECTED TO BE A BLOODBATH, WITH PRO-DEVOLUTIONISTS ATTACKING THE GOVERNMENT AND LABOR MPS, SEVERAL OF THEM FROM SCOTTISH CONSTITUENCIES, WHO VOTED AGAINST OR FAILED TO SUPPORT CLOTURE. IN THE EVENT, THESE EXPECTATIONS WERE FRUSTRATED. AWARE OF THE PROXIMITY OF LOCAL ELECTIONS AND THAT ONLY THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY (SNP) STOOD TO GAIN FROM LOSS OF THE CLOTURE MOTION, PARTY AND TRADE UNION LEADERS SUCCESSFULLY BLOCKED PASSAGE OF RESOLUTIONS WHICH WOULD HAVE EXACERBATED INTERNAL DIVISIONS OR UNDERMINED THE GOVERNMENT. PLATFORM SPEAKERS, MOREOVER, REPEATEDLY EMPHASIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTY COHESION AND DREW THE WARMEST RESPONSE FROM DELEGATES WHEN CASTIGATING THE OPPOSITION FOR REAL OR IMAGINED OFFENSES.

2. LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL MICHAEL FOOT SET THE TONE OF THE DEVOLUTION DEBATE BY AFFIRMING THE GOVERNMENT'S DETERMINATION TO ENACT HOME RULE LEGISLATION FOR SCOTLAND AND WALES, DESCRIBING THE GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS TO BROADEN SUPPORT FOR THE DEVOLUTION PRINCIPLE AS WELL AS THE BILL, AND BLAMING THE OPPOSITION CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL MPS FOR THE LOSS OF THE CLOTURE MOTION. FOOT'S MESSAGE WAS ECHOED BY PLATFORM SPOKESMEN THROUGHOUT THE CONFERENCE, BUT FAILED TO OVERCOME THE DELEGATES' AWARENESS THAT THE BILL'S PROSPECTS FOR THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE ARE EXCEEDINGLY DIM. SEVERAL DELEGATES, HOWEVER, OPPOSED DEVOLUTION FROM THE FLOOR, AND THEIR CASE WAS MOST EFFECTIVELY PUT BY LABOR MP TAM DALYELL. HE WAS LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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EASILY THE LEAST POPULAR MAN AT THE CONFERENCE. AN EMERGENCY RESOLUTION STRONGLY CONDEMNING LABOR MPS WHO VOTED AGAINST OR FAILED TO SUPPORT THE CLOTURE MOTION WAS, ON THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATION, VOTED DOWN BY A LARGE MARGIN. AFTER ENDORSING A CONCILIATORY EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE STATEMENT (DRAFTED BY TRANSPORT HOUSE) ON THE SUBJECT, THE CONFERENCE IGNORED THE ADVICE OF FOOT AND THE EXECUTIVE AND APPROVED A RESOLUTION CALLING FOR AN IMMEDIATE REFERENDUM ON "DEVOLUTION, SEPARATION OR NEITHER".

3. OTHER DEBATES COVERED SUCH SUBJECTS AS HOUSING, LOCAL GOVERNMENT, INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY, EDUCATION AND TRANSPORT. EXCEPT FOR THE DEBATE ON ECONOMIC POLICY, THEY WERE ANTI-CLIMACTIC. MANY SPEAKERS, AS WAS TO BE EXPECTED, WERE SEVERELY CRITICAL OF THE GOVERNMENT, BUT THE GOVERNMENT HAD ITS DEFENDERS ON THE FLOOR AS WELL AS ON THE PLATFORM, AND RESOLUTIONS CRITICAL OF OR CONTRARY TO GOVERNMENT POLICY WERE UNIFORMLY REJECTED, OFTEN BY OVERWHELMING

MARGINS. ON THE POSITIVE SIDE, THE CONFERENCE APPROVED A

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MODERATE, WELL-REASONED INDUSTRIAL POLICY PAPER ("AN INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY FOR SCOTLAND") WHICH ADVOCATES A "MICRO-BASED STRATEGY" BASED ON THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE MIXED ECONOMY AND GREATER COOPERATION WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR.

4. THE ATTITUDES OF PARTY LEADERS WERE BEST ARTICULATED BY GENERAL SECRETARY RON HAYWARD WHO, IN ADDITION TO THE CUSTOMARY SWIPES AT THE OPPOSITION, TOLD DELEGATES THE FACTS OF LIFE: THE GOVERNMENT IS IN A MINORITY POSITION, MAY LOSE ADDITIONAL SEATS IN UPCOMING BY-ELECTIONS AND CANNOT CONTINUE TO GOVERN WITHOUT THE SUPPORT AND COHESION OF THE PARTY. IT WAS SOBERING STUFF.

5. COMMENT. BY TRADITIONAL SCOTTISH STANDARDS, THIS CONFERENCE WAS DULL AND DISPIRITED, REFLECTING THE DELEGATES' DISAPPOINTMENT OVER THE DEVOLUTION BILL AND LABOR'S DIMINISHED PROSPECTS IN THE FORTHCOMING LOCAL ELECTIONS. CLEARLY, THE PARTY STALWARTS WERE DOWN, AND MANY OBSERVERS DETECTED THE SYMPTOMS OF A POLITICAL
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ORGANIZATION IN DECLINE. WHILE SUCH PERCEPTIONS MAY BE OVERLY DRAMATIC, THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT THAT THE DEVOLUTION DEADLOCK, THE GENERAL ECONOMIC SITUATION AND PROMISED CUTS IN PUBLIC SPENDING WILL HURT LABOR IN THE LOCAL ELECTIONS. LABOR SUPPORTERS WITH WHOM WE SPOKE, LIKE OTHER OBSERVERS IN SCOTLAND WHETHER POLITICALLY COMMITTED OR NOT, WERE SURPRISED AND UNCERTAIN ABOUT THE APPARENT ABSENCE OF A STRONG SCOTTISH BACKLASH ARISING FROM LOSS OF THE CLOTURE MOTION (SEPTTEL). THIS UNCERTAINTY, COUPLED WITH THE INHERENT FLUIDITY OF THE FIVE PARTY POLITICAL STRUCTURE IN SCOTLAND, SUGGESTS THAT LOCAL ELECTIONS WILL BE UNUSUALLY VOLATILE. NEARLY EVERYONE EXPECTS THE SNP TO REGISTER LARGE GAINS, BUT THUS FAR POLL DATA -- NONE OF WHICH WE CONSIDER RELIABLE -- ONLY ADDS TO THE UNCERTAINTY. ONE POLL SHOWS SHARP GAINS FOR THE SNP, WHILE ANOTHER INDICATES SLIGHT DECLINE IN SNP SUPPORT WITH CONCOMITANT GAINS FOR THE TORIES AND LABOR.

6. THE GOVERNMENT FOR CONSTITUTIONAL AND POLITICAL REASONS, DOES NOT WISH TO HAVE A DEVOLUTION REFERENDUM PRIOR TO PASSAGE OF THE BILL. CONSTITUTIONALLY, SUCH A REFERENDUM WOULD UNDERMINE THE SOVEREIGNTY OF PARLIAMENT. WHILE POLITICALLY IT MIGHT BE INCONCLUSIVE SINCE TO OBTAIN PASSAGE IN PARLIAMENT IT WOULD PROBABLY HAVE TO INCLUDE QUESTIONS ON INDEPENDENCE AND THE STATUS QUO. MANY OBSERVERS, HOWEVER, BELIEVE THE GOVERNMENT WILL ULTIMATELY BE FORCED TO REFERENDUM. IN THIS CONTEXT. THE CONFERENCE RESOLUTION WAS TROUBLESOME.

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